

LIVING LUXE

A WINTER'S TALE



ALESSANDRO MUNGE

The genius behind this extraordinary visionary

DOOR TO DOOR

Make a statement with a bold and beautiful front entrance

BLUE STREAK

How one designer uses this beloved colour





Simply the Best

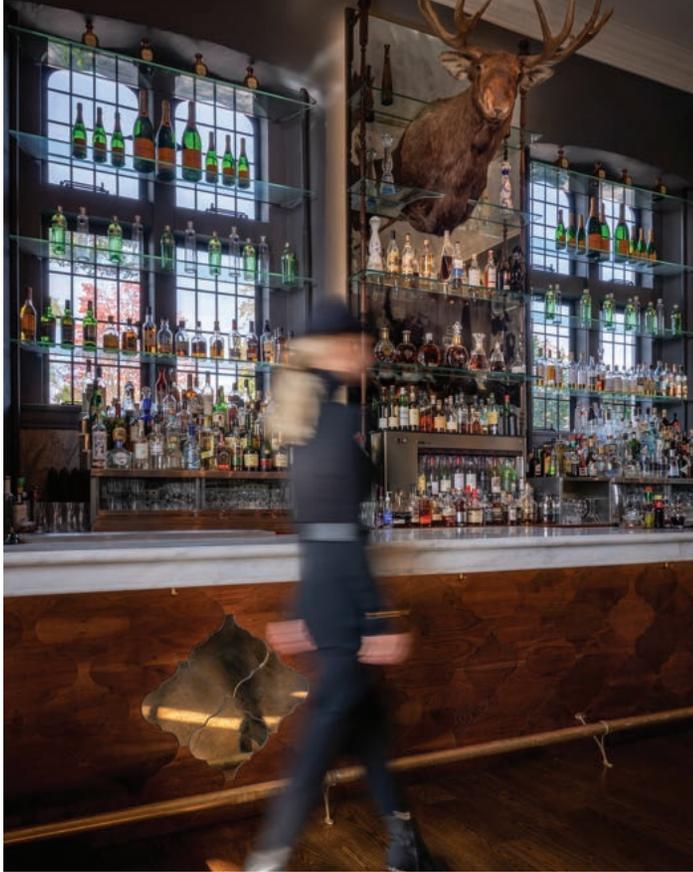
By Lisa van de Geyn
Photography by Paula Wilson

LEFT: Toronto's iconic Casa Loma — home of BlueBlood Steakhouse — is one of the city's truly majestic marvels

RIGHT: The Billiard room has an exquisite bar. The original steel-framed bay window was retrofitted with glass shelves for elegant bottle display," says Di Donato. Guests love the custom light fixture created with antique glass cylinder forms and stained genuine antlers. The custom circular booths with Italian distressed leather seating and cowhide backing adds ambiance.



Not only is BlueBlood Steakhouse perfectly steeped in history, it has an incomparable vibe, the most delectable menu and it's flawlessly designed.



It was 1914 when a three-year construction project in Toronto culminated in the completion of a 200,000-square-foot, \$3.5 million residence. Located on five acres, the 98-room castle was built for Sir Henry Pellatt and his wife, Lady Mary, who desired ornate rooms, period furniture and secret passageways.

Fast-forward more than 100 years later, and this iconic castle is one of the city's most popular attractions — Casa Loma hosts tours, private events and it's often selected as a location for television and film shoots. While seeing Casa Loma is a given for those who relish history, there are modern-day additions that take the experience to the next level.

BlueBlood Steakhouse, in the castle's Oak room on the first floor, is Liberty Entertainment Group's creation. The company — led by husband-and-wife team Nick and Nadia Di Donato (Nadia is also the creative director) — is a force in Toronto's and Miami's restaurant, special event and nightlife scene. Creating an upscale steakhouse at Casa Loma had been in the works for years. "The history and stories behind the castle pushed me to create a unique and special place in BlueBlood. The real purpose of the restaurant was to engage locals," Di Donato says. "Casa Loma was a tourist attraction. Torontonians who may have toured it in school didn't have a reason to come back. But with an iconic restaurant in an iconic building, people would be able to come back regularly. A steakhouse was the perfect concept for this heritage property and all of its grandeur."

Setting out to design a restaurant inside one of the city's most recognizable buildings is no small feat. Di Donato worked with the historical board to ensure the integrity of the castle was protected. When construction and design began, her goal was to restore all that's magical about the space. "The design was overseen by Toronto's Museum & Heritage Services. Every design detail from materials to construction was subject to approval by an appointed committee specific to the Casa Loma and BlueBlood projects. We developed a mutual respect for the desire to beautify and modernize the space while still respecting the integrity of the historic backdrop," she says, adding it was important to incorporate a modern aesthetic to update a traditional space. "Modern art, such as the Warhols and the Mr. Brainwash 'Prince' are perfect examples. Upscale furniture and light fittings — the horn chandeliers and circular booths — modernize the original space," Di Donato explains. The Billiard room (which houses part of the restaurant) incorporates interesting artifacts and traditional materials against a more modern backdrop. "You can be a modernist in a traditional space," Di Donato says of the fascinating juxtaposition in the design.

Dining out at a magically historical restaurant is all about ambiance. At BlueBlood, it's sophisticated, warm, clever and relevant, but still feels like a steakhouse. "There's genuine leathers, real Canadian cowhide and 100-percent walnut wood tables. Everything is Canadiana, with classical elements and a modern twist. The furniture and light fixtures use natural materials such as real antlers to depict the sense of a traditional steakhouse," she says. "I paired a design style palette (furnishing, colouring, lighting, construction materials) with a visual package (tableware, uniforms, signage, logo, menus), which I used as my framework to ensure the image was cohesive and consistent."

A dazzling restaurant isn't just made up of brilliant design and unparalleled ambiance. There has to be exquisite cuisine. The menu features some of the finest-quality meats from Canada, the US, Australia and Japan, and includes an impressive collection of appetizers (prime steak tartare with cured duck egg, for example), the best aged steaks and innovative sides. "Every dish has to work together with the quality of the meats we bring in. While you start with hiring a superb grill master, we also have a chef de cuisine, because we put so much attention on our appetizers and side dishes, which are such well-thought-out creations," says Di Donato. And dinner's not complete without a bottle of wine — the BlueBlood wine cellar is located in Casa Loma's original 1,700-bottle wine cellar. It's the oldest wine cellar in Toronto.



TOP: This room has fabulous original carved oak wall panelling and the original fireplace with a commissioned Mr. Brainwash oil on canvas. Prince will forever remain a one-of-a-kind piece exclusive to its spot in BlueBlood, Mr. Brainwash has said.

In the last few years, BlueBlood has hosted some notable guests — there’s often an influx of celebs during TIFF, and you’ll often see high-rollers dining. “For Drake’s 31st birthday, we hosted an Andy Warhol-themed dinner for him and 30 of his closest friends in the Oak room. He later moved into the Billiard room for a larger shindig with about 100 people with a much higher energy format,” she says, adding the restaurant has entertained athletes, politicians and movie stars.

It’s not surprising that the restaurant has garnered accolades — the most recent is the UK’s Design et al Best Designed Restaurant in the

Americas and Caribbean in the International Hotel & Property Award 2020. BlueBlood was the winner among to 12 shortlisted best designed restaurants. “To be recognized on an incredible global platform was a proud moment for the entire team. It was enough of an honour just to be shortlisted in the company of fellow design professionals, but winning the award was an extreme honour. It provides assurance to future and existing clients that my design work is among the world’s best.” Di Donato says designing BlueBlood was one of the most exciting projects she’s had to date — coming up with an incredible concept with Casa Loma as your backdrop has to be daunting but incredible work. “With an immense appreciation and respect for the intricate details of historic design, I created a little design magic by juxtaposing the original warmth and sophistication with new, clever and relevant elements of design.” 